

International Seminar for UNESCO Integral Study of the Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue: "The influence of the Silk Roads on Turkish Culture and Art". 30, October, 1990. Izmir, Turkey.

CHINESE INFLUENCES IN ANATOLIAN TURKISH ART

Prof.DR.Gontil ONEY

Exposure to Chinese culture of our ancestors, who dominated different regions of Central Asia for centuries has certainly enriched cultural life on both sides and provided new dimensions.

Further strengthening of ties between the Chinese and Turks occurs when Chinese rulers ask for the help of Uygur Turks to quell a series of insurrections in the 8th century A.D.

The friendly relations between China and neighboring Turks are further bolstered by the conquest of the Mongolian Empire by Uygur Turks around the middle of the eighth century. After 715, the rulers of Fergane, Samarkand and Baktriana asked for and got support from the Chinese army in their fight against the Arab armies.

These reciprocal political relationships resulted in increased trade along the "Silk Road" with goods coming all the way from the Far East to the West, to Anatolia and Europe. The valuable merchandise and art objects from China thus become fashionable. Gifts from other rulers, battle spoils and trade goods in the form of Chinese porcelain, silk, carpets, metal objects and miniatures have affected the art of Islam.

We come across the first Central Asian and Far Eastern effects in Islamic art in the city of Samarra built by the Abbasids in Mesopotamia for Turkish soldiers they brought from Turkestan. The extension of this cultural synthesis which started in the ninth century is observed in Anatolian Seljuk art during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The Seljuks, whose origins go back to Oguz tribes in Turkestan, have successfully presented a clever synthesis of Turkish, Far Eastern and Arao arts.

When Ghengis Khan, ruler of all Turkish and Mongolian tribes in Central Asia decided in the beginning of the thirteenth century to conquer China, ruthless fighting between the Mongolians and the Chinese followed. With the defeat of the Suns Empire in 1279 and

ascension of Ghengis Khan's son Kubilay to the Chinese throne, a new era of Central Asian - Chinese relations began, resulting in a new synthesis of Sino-Turkish-Mongolian arts. Likewise, Mongolian invaders brought Chinese influence to Anatolia during the thirteenth century.

Despite all the devastation brought about by Mongolian invasions, thirteenth century marks an era when free trade between Europe and the Far East had its most glorious years, as extensively described by the famous traveler Marco Polo.

The Chinese influenced synthesis encountered in 13th to 17th century Seljuk and Ottoman minor arts, sometimes displays a pronounced Chinese character while, at other times, the Chinese influence is more subtle.

I wish to draw attention to this remarkable feature of Seljuk and Ottoman arts with due emphasis on certain Chinese influenced motifs.

Far Eastern faces with drawn eyes on Seljuk palace tiles depicting Seljuk Sultans and palace personage again remind us of east-west relations. The most striking examples are seen on tiles from Kubadabad Palace, built by the famous Seljuk Sultan Alaeddin Keykubad in 1236 on the shores of Lake Beysehir in western Anatolia.

On Kubadabad tiles, there are numerous examples showing the Sultan and the elite of the palace and even in some cases the palace women, sitting cross-legged. These figures have full cheeks, drawn eyes, slender noses, a small mouth and long hair. They wear ornamented kaftans. According to their designs they are most probably made of Chinese silk or brocade. Typical Chinese rings, droplets are common design elements.

Our knowledge of Seljuk textiles is highly insufficient. A red silk brocade cloth fragment in the West Berlin Kunst Gewerbe Museum contains gilt decoration with double headed eagles and arabesques with Chinese influenced dragon heads. This cloth is attributed to 13th century. It was most probably woven in Konya. Marco Polo, on his return from China remarks in his diary, that large quantities of fine quality silks similar to the Chinese were woven in Anatolia.

Dragons, the typical animals of the Chinese Art and culture appear in Anatolian Seljuk art extensively, especially in stone and stucco reliefs. They are generally depicted in pairs. Dragons are found on civilian and religion works. They are particularly dominant on fortress and Karavanserais (inns). The dragon reliefs from Konya Fortress are characteristic examples. The fortress as built by the famous Seljuk Sultan Alaeddin Keykubad in 1221.

A common typical characteristic of Seljuk dragon reliefs is the exaggerated length of the bodies in knotted form and the presence of a head at each end. In some examples the double head is replaced by two dragons facing each other. They have pointed ears, large almond eyes, open mouth and chins which extend in a helical twist. Feinted teeth and a forked tongue protrude from the open mouth.

The actual head is the one not biting the body. Here pair of feet and a wing are observed. Seljuk dragons are found sometimes on arabesque background.

Stucco dragon reliefs from the Alaeddin Palace of Konya are symmetrically placed. They were additions to the palace during the reign of Sultan Alaeddin Keykubad (1220-1237).

In the courtyard mesjid of the Kayseri Sultanhan, built again during the reign of Sultan Alaeddin Keykubad, there are various dragon reliefs. The south and east arches are decorated with symmetrically placed dragon figures. The bodies form heart-shaped ornaments. The heads are in the middle of the arch. The two dragon heads facing each other in the middle of the arch have open mouth with pointed teeth.

The dragons on Seljuk fortresses, palaces, Karavanserais are most probably protecting symbols to prevent the entry of enemy and sickness, or they are symbols of fertility. As believed in China, dragons reside in clouds and they control the rain, the fertility of the earth.

We encounter various other dragon figures in Seljuk architecture and minor arts. Some are depicted together with the planet symbols or with lion heads or with bull's head, or with signs of the zodiac. In this case they are mostly connected with astrological symbols. Dragons are also shown in connection with the famous 12 animals of the Turkish-Chinese calendar. The portal of Gök Medrese of Sivas has animal heads placed symmetrically on the key stones at both sides of the arch. Upon close inspection, it is noted that these are animals from the Turkish-Chinese animal calendar. The animal heads are carved in high relief and are interlocked in arabesque form. A dragon head is placed in the middle of the composite picture. The open mouth, pointed ears and teeth and forked tongue are in Seljuk style. Heads

of snake, horse, sheep, tiger, hare, mouse, bull, dog and elephant are typical animals of the Turkish-Chinese animal calendar. We know several other examples of this calendar in Seljuk architecture and minor arts. This calendar was used in China and also by many Turkish and Mongol tribes. Each animal represents a year, one followed by the other.

Dragons shown with the tree of life or dragon heads at wing tips or tail ends of double headed eagles or lions, or of sphinxes are also common in Seljuk art.

At the portal of the Cifte minareli Medrese of Erzurum from the end of 13th century, there is a relief of the tree of life on both sides of the portal. On top of the tree, there is a double headed eagle and pair of dragons is placed underneath. The bodies are ornamented with scale motifs and have single knots. Dragon pair with life tree may be considered as symbol of underground and hell or as guardians protecting the life tree.

In Seljuk metal work we again encounter the dragon pair. Dragons and lion's head on a bronze door knob form Ulu Cami of Cizre, today in the Dahlem Museum of Berlin is an interesting example. It has two symmetrically placed dragons with a lion's head in between. The dragons are shown biting their wings. The tails are terminated with eagle heads having pointed beaks in the Eurasian animal style. As it is well known lion or the eagle is the symbol of sun, might and domination. The dragons, also symbols of moon, darkness, are represented to together with the opposite symbolism.

The symbolic world of Seljuk dragons is partly explained with Far-Eastern beliefs, astral mythological beliefs as well as beliefs in connection with the underground and the universe and finally the shaman traditions help to make a rich but complex world of symbols.

Single or double peacocks or phoenixes are frequently repeated on Seljuk palace tiles. The Far-Eastern influence is dominant. The peacocks on the Kubadabad palace tiles have highly artistic compositions. Their tails are represented in a most decorative manner in different colors. The neck is drawn with elegant curves, balancing the composition in a skillful manner. They are depicting the palace as a corner of paradise. As it is well known, peacock represents the might of the empire, like in Chinese tradition.

The long legged water birds in Far Eastern tradition are shown widely varying and highly artistic compositions.

Chinese influence is well known in Turkish ceramic and tile art. Chinese art displays some of its most highly valued porcelain products during the Ming Dynasty (1368 - 1644) reaching the zenith of glory in the fifteenth century. Objects of art, especially porcelain ware from this period have reached the Ottoman Court in Istanbul in great numbers through gifts, booty, inheritance or through ~purchasing. In fact, the present Topkapi Palace Collection of Chinese porcelains consisting of more than ten thousand items from different periods, including the Ming period, is reputed to be the biggest single collection of Chinese porcelain outside China.

This priceless collection has been published in English in three large volumes in 1986 by Sotheby in London in collaboration with the Topkapi Palace Museum. This meticulous publication giving full details, is of special interest for art historians working on Chinese art.

The fact that Ottoman Turks called Chinese porcelain “fagfuri” meaning also “Emperor of China” is not exactly a coincidence. It is also obvious that the word “çini” used to describe faience tilework adorning walls, refers to the “Chinese ware”. Chinese motifs encountered on Ottoman tiles and ceramic were manufactured in Iznik and Kütaya during the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries reflect, to a great extent, effects of contemporary year and Ming period porcelain.

The most striking influence is especially noticed in the so-called blue and white group, imitating the blue and white porcelain of the Chinese year and Ming period. The designs are in various shade of blue and turquoise on the background under a transparent glaze, or in a certain on a dark blue background. A certain group of the blue and white pottery is decorated with Chinese clouds, tree balls, rocks, peonies, lotus flowers, dragons, dragon scales and various other flowers. They resemble porcelain with their hard, white clay of fine quality.

In later examples of the blue and whites, naturalistic flowers in Ottoman style overshadow the Chinese influence.

The best known type of Ottoman tile and pottery from Iznik and Kütaya is the polychrome group with the famous tomato red. This type is manufactured from the middle of 16th century to the end of the 17th century.

Like the blue and white pottery, on a certain group of the polychrome tile and pottery, we encounter again the Chinese influence of Ming pottery. Sometimes Chinese motifs are mixed with naturalistic flowers in Ottoman style. More often they are used on their own. Up to seven colors were employed in these tiles. A high quality glaze makes the colors shinier. Chinese motifs such as tree balls and Chinese clouds, peonies, lotus flower, bordures in rock designs, birds in Chinese style are frequently used.

From the sixteenth century until the middle of the 18th century -a very rich and varied group of carpets attained fame as “Usak” carpets. They were woven as large floor carpets in dark blue, yellow, red and cream colors.

A certain group of these carpets are decorated with Chinese patterns. Chinese clouds, spotted triad motifs on a white, blue or red field are typical Far-Eastern features. The borders of Usak carpets attained fame after Chinese influence. The Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art in Istanbul is in possession of some very fine examples.

On some high quality silk brocade and velvet fabrics from the 16-17th centuries, we again encounter Chinese motifs. Alongside the royal kaftans made of imported silk from China, some Ottoman fabrics are adorned by Chinese designs. Sometimes, Chinese influence is more pronounced, but at other times, they form a clever synthesis with the classical Ottoman motifs. These fabrics were produced most probably in Bursa. Chinese clouds and dotted triad motifs are very popular. In the Topkapi palace collections, there are valuable kaftans with these Far-Eastern motifs.